

Introduction

Religious Studies programs in the US are surprisingly similar in character. In terms of mission, most exhibit an explicit interest in producing graduates equipped to deal with diverse interactions in the world, who think critically about larger problems which effect humanity as a whole, who appreciate the diverse approaches different cultures and traditions take and have taken towards their life and cultural context, and who can communicate those inquiries and answers thoughtfully and articulately. Further, Religious Studies programs place great interest in looking at and critically analyzing religious text and thought—looking at not only the origins of religious tradition but also the ways in which religion has been applied, interpreted, and augmented over time. In short, Religious Studies programs in the US aim to create well-rounded, critical thinkers equipped to deal with the realities of an increasingly religious and religiously devout modern world.

The approaches these programs take varies only slightly, despite a great diversity in language and explicit organization. For purposes of the following analysis, this work will first evaluate the nature of the different Religious Studies programs within the context of their larger university settings. It will briefly discuss common graduation requirements, credit loads, and breadth of diversity encompassed in the ideal liberal education. Then it will offer an overview of requirements specific to Religious Studies programs that also are consistent in character, i.e. those things that almost all Religious Studies programs require of their graduates. Here this paper will offer commentary on capstone requirements and thesis programs required or recommended by Religious Studies departments, as well as discuss any additional requirements, beyond those of the larger university, that are unique but consistent to the study of religion in America. At this point the discussion will then diverge into a treatment of the main schism present in the organization of Religious Studies programs, and offer subsequently two case studies designed to express both the similarities and differences present in two representative but

diverse departments. This will show that despite the organizational diversity, there remains an overarching similarity within the programs.

First, some surprising findings: Religious Studies departments do not exhibit much variability from the observations noted here relevant to either department size or nature of access, i.e. public versus private institution. Neither does obvious organization nor curricular rigor change due to these factors; smaller programs exhibit the same organizational structure as do larger programs, or lack thereof depending on specific comparisons, and both employ interchangeably the different methodological approaches outlined below. In sum, size of institution and funding structure exhibit no consistent influence upon how well the Religious Studies department is organized or on the structure of its curriculum; the determining factor for this appears to be managerial in nature, i.e. that individual departments choose to employ specific methods as best suits their needs or desires without regard for their size or funding model.

Context: Religious Studies within the larger University setting

All programs under review exhibit the same interest in producing liberally educated graduates. University requirements overwhelmingly dictate 120 semester hours of study for graduation, with no more than half of these in university breadth requirements, often called general courses of study or “generals” for short.¹ These courses are fairly consistent in nature and exhibit a representative sample of all institutional offerings. In general, these courses fall into the following thematic categories: Diversity, History, Literature, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Philosophy/Theology/Intellectual History, and Writing. The exact number of courses required varies slightly by institution (some may require more mathematics courses, others more literature, history, or philosophy courses) but the categorical division remains consistent despite these minor variations. Many of these courses are left to student choice (within a given category, the student may select the

¹ Some institutions, particularly theological or seminary institutions, call these classes “core” instead of “generals.”

precise nature of the qualifying course), but some are more specific. For instance, most institutions require a specific set of mathematics coursework (college algebra, then statistics, then calculus as an example) while natural or social science requirements can be selected from a wider array of options (biology, chemistry, or physics and sociology, psychology, or anthropology). Language, interestingly, is not consistent across institutions. Many leave the matter to the individual college—some require proficiency in a foreign language as part of an Arts degree, while others simply let the college determine if a language is necessary or if a more specific requirement is more fitting, i.e. a heavier focus on method coursework, as is the case in some theological seminaries. In sum, the liberal requirements do not vary greatly across institutions, represent half of a student's total coursework, and include both highly specified requirements and open-ended, student choice elements.

All secular institutions require a major and minor focus, although the relation of these varies somewhat. The major focus represents approximately 25% of the student's total coursework, or 30-33 credit hours average (the exact numbers vary from 27 to 42 semester hours). The minor focus typically represents a little more than half of this number, or 18-20 semester hours, and may or may not be thematically related to the major selection. Most secular institutions allow the selection of a minor from any of the university offerings—a Religious Studies major is free to pick a minor as per his preference without specific regard to the Religious Studies coursework or major. Theological seminaries or religiously affiliated schools, however, do not require or offer a minor per se; instead, the student will select a concentration area, e.g. Bible Studies or Systematic Theology, and another area of interest (functioning like a minor), for instance non-Western texts or Ethics.

Thus Religious Studies programs tend to occupy common ground among their host institutions, requiring universally a foundation in liberal education as the backbone of the university experience in addition to a specified area of interest or focus. These goals both broad and specific tend to be consistent in character across institutions and share a common set of outcomes. It is fair to conclude

that analysis of any Religious Studies program may be commenced within a generalized understanding of University culture and expectation across the board—there are no striking departures from these core, liberal standards of education that would affect in any significant way the character of a Religious education.

Details: Religious Studies programs writ large

Of note at the outset to a discussion of the specific characteristics of Religious Studies programs is the obvious organizational distinction between them. There are two dominant approaches: thematic and tradition. Thematic approaches tend to focus on placing religion in context of some kind, whether within larger culture, within history, or within other endeavors like philosophy. This approach appears more methodological in nature and focuses on how religion is studied, how it affects or is affected by the larger world, and the issues or conflicts surrounding religion both as a salient feature of humanity and as an academic discipline. Conversely, the tradition approach focuses on specific religious groups, thoughts, or traditions and places thematic issues within the context of the religious time or place. Concentrations of this type may look at methods for evaluating the Christian scriptures, or how Christian thinkers have used or dealt with the scriptures over time or within a specific context, but the specific tradition becomes the vehicle of analysis more than the method.

This is not to say overlap does not exist; indeed, many tradition institutions will further divide their course offerings into themes, i.e. if the theme is textual analysis, the department may offer coursework in Islamic text, history, and thought. The purpose of the hierarchy, though, is to organize the approach each course takes into a preconceived intellectual endeavor: a History of Islam course within the textual theme will focus on exploring Islamic history through methods of textual interpretation.

These preconceived endeavors appear designed to further the department's mission and aims, which appear similar in nature (give students exposure to both diverse religious traditions and the ways in which those religions have affected and been affected by their world and culture) but express a

striking dissimilarity in ideological approach: tradition focus looks at religion as an authentic, salient feature of culture requiring contextualization, while a thematic focus views religion as an abstract, seemingly from the perspective of an outsider looking in, and feels more clinical in approach. For example, one thematic school expresses its purpose as teaching students to “recognize and identify similarities and differences among various historical religious cultures and communities, and the meaning of those...[for]...the members of the respective communities.” Conversely, a tradition oriented program promotes Religious Studies as “an academic discipline devoted to the study of...specific world religions [that]...recognizes the interconnectedness of religion with other dimensions of culture.” This is not to suggest that one approach is superior or more effective than another (although such will be the case shortly), but rather to show the difference apparent in the approaches—on the one hand, the study of religion as an integral part of humanity, and the other as a feature of humanity influential upon but seemingly separable for purposes of academic analysis; a compassionate (maybe sympathetic is the better term?) versus clinical approach to the discipline.

Within the larger institutional requirements, diverse Religious Studies programs also share many of the same characteristics. Language, for instance, is not a common requirement of Religious Studies programs. Thus, if it is also not a requirement for the university at large, a student of religion will not be required in any way to obtain proficiency in a foreign tongue. However, Religion departments almost universally recommend a language to students intending to further their education through postgraduate work, either master’s or doctoral endeavors. In these cases, institutions recommend either a modern foreign language (French or German are common) or ancient textual languages (Hebrew, Latin, or Greek).

This is the same feature for full thesis work (discussed below). Departments of Religion tend to offer both a capstone experience (conceived in different ways) and a thesis project. The thesis project is

recommended only for students pursuing graduate work and is not required of all Religious Studies students. The capstone experience is, however.

By the numbers, programs almost universally require 60% of coursework in religion to be completed at the upper division levels. Total semester hours required by the department are always in line with the larger university requirements, but are distributed differently depending on the rigors of the specific program. Most departments require nine semester hours, or three total courses, spent in specific courses designed to offer students broad exposure to the academic study of religion. These are often divided simply into an introduction to religion course (explains the purposes and generic approaches to the study of religion, or a religion survey course), and then an introduction to specific religious traditions (Eastern Religions and Western Religions) and/or a methods and theories course (theories, criticisms, debates, scriptures, or research methods).

As discussed previously, there are two competitive organizational approaches into which these required courses may fall; however conceived, Religious Studies programs generally require, in addition to the introduction to religion course, exposure to world traditions as part of the major. These are often low level courses, numbering under 2000, and are designed to give students broad introduction to various faiths and the issues/interests at work within them. Interestingly, some institutions, often tradition programs, do not require students to complete any introductory tradition coursework, and instead require only the introduction to religion and an upper division course in methods and theory of religion. For example, one smaller program, which requires 30 total semester hours, encourages students to create their own specialty within the program and requires only “Introduction to the Study of Religion,” “Method and Theory in the Study of Religion,” and “Major/Minor Seminar.” No other specific requirements, either thematic or tradition, are indicated. Lest this seem self-fulfilling, by comparison a moderate sized Ivy League program is organized the same way—both require the intro course and the senior capstone/methods courses, but encourage the student to devise his own

program, in conjunction with Religious Studies faculty, within certain parameters. These guidelines often reflect the institution's methodological approach—the Ivy League school, which follows a tradition approach, requires only that students select a course of study which incorporates one course in each of two regional religious traditions, both East and West. The remainder guidelines are left to the student and his faculty advisor.

These required courses require further examination. The introduction to religion course is conceived often as a gateway survey into religious inquiry—the two approaches are here, too, expressed: intro courses often exhibit some methodological approach and use a theme of some kind to introduce students to the type of thought and theory prevalent in the study of religion (survey classes like “Religion and Film” are common examples). Tradition approaches are also common and will incorporate exposure to the three major religions and to methods prevalent in the study of those faiths (clever names are often absent from these courses, replaced with simple monikers like “Intro to the Study of Religion”). In sum, these courses share a few common goals: 1) introduce students to religion as an academic endeavor; 2) introduce students to the types of theories and methods common in religious scholarship; 3) introduce students to religious texts; 4) introduce students to religious scholarship. One might expect also an introduction to major faiths as a common part of these courses, but often it is not; programs that require students to select separately from coursework focused on specific traditions do not appear as concerned with those issues in the introductory survey course. Method and textual exposure are the central issues—and even programs that do incorporate tradition as part of the intro survey also place an emphasis on methodological exposure.

Methods and theories courses tend to take one of two tracks. On the hand are courses which focus on research tools and methods that are designed to teach students the mechanics of conducting research and give them hands-on experience with library resources, citation and prose styles, and methodological approaches to research. Often, classes of this type are shorter, comprising one semester

hour of work, and work in conjunction with another, larger method course of the other type. This second approach is more abstract and analytical in focus and incorporates comparative techniques designed to help students understand how to craft their own research question. These will cover more conceptual material, methods of interpretation, and contemporary cultural recognition as part of an effort to understand religious phenomena as an academic endeavor. These tend to be standard length classes, covering three semester hours, and may or may not include techniques of research depending on whether such a course is offered separately. Regardless of approach, the methods course is designed to prepare students either for their capstone experience or senior thesis (generally optional as described below).

A capstone experience in Religious Studies programs is always required. However, many institutions provide a thesis option for honors students and those planning to continue on to graduate work. In brief, thesis projects consist of an original research topic constructed in conjunction with the student's advisor and employ the critical, methodological analysis developed as part of the undergraduate Religious Studies training. This effort culminates in a massive paper—on average 50 pages in length, but specific requirements vary from 30-70 total pages, not counting references and notes. The thesis, if selected (and note that it is optional in all cases that it is offered; no student is required to write a thesis unless he also wants institutional honors and meets the academic requirements, which are often a GPA of 3.5 or higher) replaces the capstone experience and absolves the student of that requirement. If a method course is required separately, as is the case with several institutions, this is still required whether the capstone or thesis option is selected—necessarily, since the method course creates the groundwork for the research project.

Thesis projects range in scope and resemble more accurately master's thesis work. The project is unique and developed individually between a student and his advisor. As these are consistently

optional projects that share goals, if not specific features, with the capstone project, covering them separately here is not helpful.

However, capstone projects are universally required and share several common traits. First, of course, is the reliance on skills developed as part of the methods and theories course. Second is the unifying theme of the project, which typically seeks to culminate the overall Religious Studies experience and juxtapose the diverse elements of the student's education to each other. In some instances, this course is not rigorously defined and students are able to choose a capstone experience from several different thematic options, such as "Secular Spiritual America" or "Religion on the Ground." In these cases, the student will work with the faculty member to devise the specific details of his research project within the boundaries of the course theme but with respect to the student's overall Religious Studies experience. In other instances, the course is broadly conceived as a capstone experience (courses might simply be titled "Senior Seminar"), giving students have wider latitude to define their own project. Often, institutions with this sort of capstone project exhibit a more rigorous course of study, with fewer elective options or more requirements in a specific array of disciplines. In either case, the course is offered as a small seminar, usually 10-15 students, and encourages students to work closely together and with the professor towards a culminating research project.

Conclusion

In sum, there are two distinct approaches to curricular structure in Religious Studies programs, and several smaller differences within them. Despite these differences, most programs express explicitly their interest in providing for students a well-rounded sense of exposure to diverse religious thought and traditions, as well as the dominant questions in the academic study and the methods for evaluating these questions. The difference, in essence, is in the vehicle chosen—will theme and theory drive the student's education, or will exposure to religious traditions dictate this journey? To the extent that both method and tradition are satisfied in the process, it is hard to argue that either approach is preferable or

more effective. However, following the subsequent case studies this paper will attempt to suggest an ideal curricular approach.

Two Case Studies: CSU—Chico and Vanderbilt

For purposes of this study, several methods of research were employed. Schools were selected without regard for faculty size, public versus private organization, or religious affiliation. Program size was determined by number of dedicated faculty, i.e. not counting adjunct or visiting appointments. Here, small programs retain up to 10 full-time faculty, moderate programs 11-20, and large programs greater than 20. The supposition of this work has been that diverse program sizes do not necessarily affect organizational decisions, as had been observed throughout the process. As such, curricular organization is readily comparable between programs of diverse sizes; so, too, is it comparable between public and private institutions. The only observable difference in curriculum is among religiously affiliated theological seminaries; these programs tend to offer coursework related to the affiliation of the college, i.e. Catholic schools offer courses heavy in Christian thought and theology, and are more rigorously organized than are the secular schools. However, because these institutions exhibit an additional, or overarching, mission to produce religiously devout as well as religiously aware scholars, they have not been included in the selection for these case studies. Beyond this, other variables appear negligible for purposes of comparison, and so the two schools selected represent simply the two extremes: an east coast and a west coast school, one of the thematic approach and the other of tradition, and one public versus one private. These schools are California State University at Chico and Vanderbilt University.

CSU—Chico

Chico is home to a small Religious Studies program with nine full-time faculty. It is organized according to religious tradition, an ideology which extends from the core major requirements thorough to the upper division electives. There are thematic options as well, but these fall within the larger tradition structure. The college exists to inform students regarding the academic study of religion, create

respect and understanding for religious diversity, promote scholarly inquiry of religious issues, and foster informed conversation about the role of religion in modern cultural life.

The Religious Studies program at Chico is heavily organized. Students complete 120 semester hours in total: 48 in General Education (called Pathways), 37 in the Religious Studies major, and the remainder in breadth requirements, such as Mathematics, US History and Institutions, Diversity, and Writing, as well as in a qualifying minor. The university requires at least 40 total semester hours to be completed at the upper division level, and accepts courses from any of the university requirements within that expectation. The Religious Studies department does not have a similar requirement, but this is due to the rigorous nature of the requirements which will ensure that the majority of a student's work is completed in upper division Religious Studies courses.

Of the 37 semester hours required for the major, most are predetermined for the student while a few are elective options. All students take the following courses, which equate to nineteen total hours (grouped here first in lower division followed by upper division): Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; Asian Religions; Introduction to Religion; then Library Research Methods; Religion in America; Theories and Criticisms in Religion. Further requirements are either the Senior Capstone Seminar or the Senior Honors Research Paper, which both fulfill the department's capstone requirement but only one of the two options is required. The upper division coursework is intended to prepare students to create a research project of their own, whether the capstone or honors thesis—both of which aim to contextualize the student's study in the other upper division courses, as well as satisfy an additional, departmental Writing Intensive course.

Students may then select eighteen additional hours of courses from a small range of elective categories. First they must take a course each in a Western religious tradition—focused on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the coursework for each focusing on religious texts (course examples include Hebrew Bible, Muhammad and the Qur'an, and New Testament)—and in an Asian tradition (coursework

here is less textual in basis and includes courses such as Buddhism and Chinese Religions). Finally, the remaining twelve hours of elective courses come from two broad thematic categories: Religion, Society, and Culture and Anthropology of Religion. The tradition focus is still present here, however; courses from the first category focus on cultural experience of diverse world religions—Islam and the World; Jews, Muslims, and the West; World Religions and Global Issues as a few examples. More thematic, abstract courses exist as well, like Religion and Film, Religion and Sexuality, and Religion and Science. Anthropology courses are housed in other departments (English, Anthropology, and Humanities primarily) and students may choose an additional six semester hours from either of the two categories (meaning all twelve hours may come from the first of the two categories). Finally, a directed readings course is also available as an elective option, but is available only with faculty permission.

The capstone and thesis projects available to students at Chico vary only in construction and implementation. Both are designed to “cap” the student’s undergraduate experience, and both require the student to draw upon “their interests developed during the first three years of work in religious studies.” The difference lies in the content of the finished product. For a capstone, the students enjoy a seminar experience with a small group of other seniors working on a shared topic within the discipline. These topics vary year-to-year, but the final, written project expected of each student will fall within the broad confines of this predetermined theme. For an honors thesis, the student pairs individually with one faculty member and works under supervision on a theme and project devised entirely by the student—it must similarly “cap” the student’s undergraduate experience, but it is not predetermined thematically, giving the student wide latitude to develop his own topic. In this way, it is not dissimilar from a master’s thesis. There is no committee requirement, however, and the faculty advisor serves as the sole judiciary for the whole project. In either case, the capstone or the thesis, the theme can and does vary and guidance on a topic is left entirely to the individual faculty.

In sum, a student completing undergraduate work at Chico will have had intense exposure to several world religions and the ways in which they each deal with ethical and philosophical topics, as well as gain an understanding of the research methods and theoretical concepts at work in the academic study of religion. They will have applied these tools towards an original piece of research of their own creation, and ultimately come away with a broader understanding of religious scholarship, religious diversity, and religious inquiry in a cultural context.

Vanderbilt University

The Religious Studies department at Vanderbilt is slightly larger than that of Chico, housing twelve full-time faculty, but is organized and structured very differently. Most of the major consists of electives divided into broad, thematic categories, during which students gain exposure to the world's major religious traditions as a matter of method and context, i.e. the situation of Christianity into a specific theme (think of it thus: in a tradition school, like Chico, the method becomes the vehicle for exploring the tradition; at Vanderbilt, the tradition is the vehicle for exploring the method). Thus, while the broad categories include the titles of world religions, the content therein is heavily thematic in style. The mission of Vanderbilt's program is not dissimilar from that of Chico: the department trains students to understand religious and cultural diversity, explore the methodology of academic religious inquiry, see how religion constructs meaning, and become familiar with the theories of religion.

Vanderbilt is loosely organized in requirements within the college (i.e. the students enjoy wide flexibility of course selection), but the university at large is heavily organized. Students similarly take 120 semester hours total for graduation, of which 102 hours must be completed in the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS). 51 hours (approximate; varies based on student ability) are completed in general or liberal requirements (called AXLE, or Achieving Excellence in Liberal Education), 30 in the Religious Studies program proper, and the remainder in electives or an optional minor (for which students have slightly less latitude, depending on their individual course selection, as the vast majority of courses must

come from the CAS). Neither the university nor the college requires a language for graduation, but the college recommends one for those interested in pursuing graduate study.

AXLE requirements are divided into Writing and Liberal Arts: students complete four courses (about 12 semester hours) in professional writing instruction, and an additional thirteen courses (about 39 hours) in breadth requirements. These are Humanities and Creative Arts (nine hours; includes disciplines like Philosophy and Classics), International Cultures (nine hours), History and Culture of the United States (three hours), Mathematics and Natural Science (nine hours), Social and Behavioral Science (six hours), and Perspectives (three hours; perhaps better understood as Diversity since these courses focus on racial, gender, multi-cultural, and ethical issues). Vanderbilt does not explicitly require a distribution of upper- versus lower-level coursework; instead, only a requirement that the bulk of courses come from the CAS exists.

The program specific requirements are 30 hours divided into three required categories: "Methods of Study," "Religion in Culture and History," and "Senior Seminar." This division is designed to suit two dominant goals of the department: to give students an in-depth education of at least two religious traditions, and to familiarize them with the ways in which religion is studied and interpreted. A freshman seminar course, an introduction to Religious Studies, is occasionally offered and may count as elective credit towards the major, but is not explicitly required.

The first category, including courses organized around the central theme "Religious Traditions in Cultural Context," gives students exposure to theory and method of Religious Studies through the lens of religious tradition. Students fulfill fifteen hours in this category and complete courses from at least two different tradition groups, including "Christianity," "Judaism," "Islam," "Buddhism and Other Asian Religions," "African-American Religious Traditions," and "Native American Religious Traditions." This division in to tradition may belie the thematic approach indicated earlier; however, the course offerings within these divisions are highly theoretical in execution. Examples are "Ethics of the New Testament,"

“Anti-Semitism and Jewish Identity,” “Islamic Philosophy,” and “Evangelical Protestantism and the Culture Wars.” The consistent theme in these course offerings is to give students exposure not only to the tradition under review, but moreover to the interpretative method and cultural context of the tradition viewed through a thematic lens. Thus, unlike Chico which requires academic exposure to each tradition and reserves more rigorous methodological training for its upper division elective options, Vanderbilt trains students in methods of Religious Studies at every level and uses the tradition as the mode of study. In other words, Chico exposes students *to* religious traditions and *to* Religious Studies methodology; Vanderbilt exposes students *to* religious traditions *through* Religious Studies methodology.

The second broad category, called “Religion and its Role in Human Life,” abandons tradition in favor of more abstract, theoretical endeavors—as diverse from Chico, which focuses on theoretical endeavors but couches them in the study of religious traditions. Here, students must select nine total hours from two sub-categories, selecting at least one course from each of “Critical Theories of Religion” and “Ways in which Religion Shapes Thoughts, Lives, and Values of its Practitioners.” Course offerings, for example, include concepts ranging from “Global Interpretations of Christian Scriptures” and “Post-Freudian Theories and Religion” to “The Nature of Evil” and “Women in Religion.” These courses, decoupled as they generally from a focus on a specific tradition, offer a more theoretical approach to religious questions and explore the diverse ways humans have answered them—whether religiously, philosophically, and/or culturally.

Finally, all Religious Studies students attend the Senior Seminar, in which students work in a small group towards a major research project centered on a predetermined theme. The course is specifically designed to encourage students to apply their theoretical knowledge gained over the previous semesters towards this predetermined, yet broad, religious topic. This capstone experience is seemingly identical in execution to other programs, including Chico.

Students may also apply to write an Honors thesis. This program is substantially different at Vanderbilt; most institutions allow students to choose *either* the capstone or the honors thesis, but Vanderbilt requires the capstone regardless of the student's choice to write a thesis. Honors students similarly work independently under a specific faculty member on a topic and theme of their choosing, and create a massive research paper incorporating their skill in theory and method applied towards a religious question of their own creation. The final project must be at least 50 pages and includes an oral defense to be given before a committee drawn from the faculty advisor, the Dean of Undergraduate Studies, and the Religious Studies faculty at large. This process, again, is optional for undergraduates but recommended for those intent on pursuing graduate work.

Ultimately, Vanderbilt students will have spent a great deal of time investigating religious thought and theory through the eyes of various religious traditions, and while not as diverse in exposure, potentially, as are Chico graduates, Vanderbilt students are more adept with theory and abstract reasoning of religious issues. They will have in-depth exposure to religious scholarship as an ecclesiastical and philosophical endeavor, and to the dominant strains of academic thought as it has been applied to the study of religion in the world and in culture. They will have similarly created a major piece of research of their own design, applying the tools of their training towards this academic effort. They will have a firm grasp on religious meaning, its creation, and its place in the wider world.

Religious Studies at USU—What We Can Learn

The above overview of Religious Studies Programs at large and of two diverse but informative case studies ought to instruct the creation of a competitive and useful program at home, at Utah State University. I will discuss in brief the similarities and differences apparent in our program as compared to the dominant strains in other programs in general, and reveal those gaps which exist, laid bare as a result of this comparison. I will finally recommend an “ideal” program structure that would mirror the approach I find most accessible and competitive from the preceding overview.

Utah State University is not dissimilar in character than many of the other institutions reviewed for this study. Our graduates require 120 semester hours total, of which 40 must be upper division. Uniquely, USU requires a foreign language for any BA degree—which includes either 16 semester hours of language coursework or successful completion of a language exam showing “intermediate low” proficiency. The University requires a minor course of study of at least 12 semester hours, and a host of general studies equating to 30-34 of the 120 total hours required (which is substantially fewer than most other institutions; those compared specifically here require 48 and 51 respectively). These general requirements reflect trends dominant at other schools, and include American Institutions, Creative Arts, Communications Literacy (also includes Communications Intensive, which requires a course heavy in academic writing), mathematics (called Quantitative Literacy), Life and Physical Sciences, and Social Sciences. Notably, while the categories are not dissimilar from those at other schools, the total number of required hours within those categories is lower. This is likely due to the language requirement, which equates to 16 semester hours (and, added to the general requirements base of 30-34 hours, would bring the total to 46-50 hours. This is more consistent with other programs).²

The Religious Studies department itself is also similar in character. Graduates will complete 36 hours total in the major, and 15 hours in an approved minor (the selection of which they have wide latitude). Like many other institutions, the program requires only two courses—Intro to Religious Studies and the Senior Capstone. The remainder of the student’s choices come from a broad set of electives organized under four thematic headings—Cultural Inquiry, Doctrinal Inquiry, Scientific Inquiry, and General Inquiry—of which they must complete at least two courses (six hours’ worth) in each category. The course offerings from these categories are drawn largely from other departments; Cultural Inquiry, for instance, includes mostly History courses, while Scientific Inquiry includes a wide

² Further, students seeking a BS instead of a BA degree will take 16 hours of physical sciences in lieu of the language hours. In either case, the student ought to finish with about 50 hours in non-department specific coursework.

selection of Anthropology selections. There are few options for general introduction to specific religious traditions—the required Intro to Religious Studies serves as the primary exposure for students to world religions. Where other thematically organized schools tend to include tradition as part of their course offerings (while letting theme and method serve as the vehicle for the instruction), USU Religious Studies maintains its thematic structure throughout its course offerings. This suggests that USU graduates are more adept with methodological issues than those of other institutions, but less capable with cultural literacy and competing religious traditions.

The senior capstone is a required course taken in the last year of the student's undergraduate work. Like other programs, this course is a seminar consisting of a small number of students working closely with faculty on a research project falling within a broad but predetermined topic. It is methodological in focus and serves to encourage students to harness all of their skills from the previous three years of religious training and apply them towards an original research question. USU does offer an Honors program, but uniquely it does not require an additional or replacement capstone course; instead it requires a heavier balance of upper division coursework (15 additional hours to the 40 already required by the university) along with the completion of the capstone. The GPA requirements remain the same, however.

To preempt slightly the conclusions portion of this review, I see no reason to change the capstone. It functions very similarly to that of other programs, requires a heavy methodological and research component, and comes at the right time in a student's career. The addition of an honors option, similar in structure to that of other schools, might be a consideration. However, our honors program is unique and (as will be discussed briefly) solves an issue with our program wherein students lose liberal depth to the university's language requirement. As such, the honors program could remain as presently conceived and function both as a functional addition to the program and a solution to other systemic problems identified herein. This means, however, that students intending to pursue graduate

work ought to be encouraged to produce a capstone of greater weight and rigor, such that it could serve as an effective writing sample.

USU Religious Studies claims to train students “to grapple with the problems of colliding belief systems, [and to be] aware of ways in which conflict and good intentions can serve the interests of powerful institutions.” With its heavily methodological focus, it doubtless accomplishes that goal. Given the structure and course offerings, students are likely to develop critical, analytical skills applicable towards any endeavor, and a keen, skeptical eye for any kind of information or claim to which they are exposed. Further, they will develop the tools necessary to research and discover for themselves those items they are not explicitly exposed to during the course of their study.

Conclusion & Recommendations

In comparison, then, with other programs, it is the gaps in curriculum to which I will turn in conclusion to this project. I see three specific areas for concern within the program at USU. One, our grads are leaving with less exposure to world religions than are the grads of other Religious Studies programs. Two, there is too much variability in graduate training due to the open-ended nature of elective options within the degree. Three, and finally, the general requirements are less competitive than those of other institutions. As compared to other schools, it is my perspective that USU graduates are not competitive in the market place after graduation.

The solutions, though, are not odious. USU trains students effectively, or potential so, in methods of research and inquiry. The categorical division of the Religious Studies department encourages an analytical and methodical approach to the subject, and this division and goal should not be abandoned or altered. The first important observation of this report is that a thematic hierarchy is preferable for its focus on method and its critical, more academic stance towards the subject. This clinical interpretation is more attractive in character and focuses more wholly on the aims of the discipline. Religious devotees and secular thinkers alike will find common ground in such an approach, as

the dominant strain among mission statements is to create productive and critical conversation among diverse cultures, attracting as diverse an audience as possible is the more effective approach. As such, the thematic division at USU and other similar schools is the preferable one.

The gap in this approach, though, is that exposure to diverse world religions can and, at USU at least, has suffered. It is entirely possible for students to graduate from USU without any specific training in the world's dominant faiths—whether theological or academic in nature. Vanderbilt is organized similar to USU, yet students there are required to learn, academically, at least two world traditions; Chico graduates leave with academic exposure to at least three. As a function of this review, then, it is my recommendation that USU Religious Studies revamp its core curriculum to include required training in at least two world traditions. The solution here is also similar to that of the variability in graduate training, which I address next.

Students at USU will leave with a wide array of skills, and no two graduate will exhibit similarities in training or background (or at least potentially so, based on the open-ended graduation requirements within the department). Graduates of other institutions, particularly those of schools like Chico, exhibit a high degree of consistency in training, and by nature these programs can tailor their graduates to the needs of the market at any given time—and subsequently ensure that students are competitive and specifically trained. The method for this is a greater amount of required coursework and fewer elective requirements—not the pool of elective options is smaller, but that a smaller proportion of the student's graduation requirements may come from elective options. Thus, it is my recommendation that USU revamp, too, its graduation requirements distribution to more carefully control the courses to which students must be exposed and ensure a greater degree of consistency in student training.

The proposed solution to these two observations is not difficult. In the first place, course offerings must change slightly to allow students a wider range of options for world traditions, of which

the major traditions ought to be included. At present, students may select courses with specific training in Buddhism, Shamanism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. As compared to other programs, ours is missing Judaism specifically, although other dominant offerings are Ancient Mediterranean Religions and Eastern or Asian Religions. Further, our offerings within those extant traditions do not extend beyond the Introduction level, for the most part, and thus students do not get competitive exposure to even the traditions USU offers. Within the sphere of the thematic organizations offered currently, more religious traditions *and* diversity within those traditions offerings ought to be added to give students greater exposure to these diverse ideas and consequently more competitive training in the post-graduate marketplace.

Along with this curricular addition, required courses ought to be altered to ensure students receive more of the same type of training. Specifically, and assuming the above additions were made, an additional requirement should be added that students complete three hours of coursework in each of at least two religious traditions (and, ideally, this should be three—students at USU likely have already enjoyed significant exposure to Christianity and should be encouraged to train academically in at least two others beyond this tradition). This would allow the categorical division of offerings to remain the same, and the traditions coursework could be added within any of those four main spheres, but give students the exposure they currently lack. Further, the methods course (RELS 3990, Methods of Religious Studies) ought to be required of all students. This course should include (if it doesn't already) training in specific research methods and tools, e.g. library and digital resources available to students. Ideally, students would acquire the training necessary to successfully complete the capstone course prior to beginning that course; Methods of Religious Studies is the ideal place for such a thing to occur *and* such a feature would improve the quality of research projects produced by graduating seniors. Lastly, Philosophy of Religion ought to similarly become a required course; other institutions require something similar (specific exposure to arguments and critiques for and against religion as a human

institution), and such a requirement would help students compete more effectively with graduates from theological seminaries, where philosophical inquiry is targeted but thorough.

Finally, USU graduates receive less training in general education than do graduates of other institutions due to our seemingly unique language requirement (Religious Studies programs seldom offer a BS option, as ours does, so I will focus here on the BA). While the total load of general courses is consistent with that of other schools (50 total hours), USU students give 16 of those to language training—which means that students from other schools are often more culturally literate thanks to wider, liberal exposure to the traditional general categories. Specifically, USU requires fewer humanities course hours than does Chico or Vanderbilt, as well as fewer cultural or diversity course requirements (which, if I may opine, is not necessarily a bad thing). The result is that USU Bachelor's students are less liberally diverse than graduates of other programs, which may adversely affect them in the marketplace after graduation.

The purpose for this requirement is the graduate institutions typically require language training as a prerequisite for admission to a master's program. Under this assumption, USU is training students for graduate work more effectively, at least regarding a language, than are other schools. However, one must obviously ask at what cost this is happening, and how many graduates are going to master's work. In the first place, students from other institutions will have had exposure to ideas and scholarship that USU students likely will have had—yet both USU and non-USU students will presumably have had language training (USU will have required it while students of other schools will have acquired a language on their own). Second, most students do not go on to master's work (although this is likely to change as credentials increase and employment becomes more competitive³) and as a consequence these students are underserved as their training is non-competitive in the “real world” as compared to bachelors students from other schools. Thus, my final recommendation, however odious this one

³ Laura Pappano, “The Masters as the New Bachelors,” *New York Times* July 22, 2011. Accessed May 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/24/education/edlife/edl-24masters-t.html?pagewanted=all>

appears, is to do away with the language requirement for BA students and instead increase the number of upper division humanities and life sciences required for general education.⁴ In the context of the aims and mission of our Religious Studies program, this seems the most consistent solution to crafting well-rounded and competitive graduates.

So at where have we arrived? The end, at last. Thus, given the context of other schools and the gaps that exist in our own program, I recommend, briefly, the following changes:

1. Expand the traditions course offering within the Religious Studies department to more wholly reflect the reality of world religions, giving students the option to learn a wider variety of these traditions.
2. Require more courses to ensure greater consistency among graduates; specifically, require coursework in at least two (preferably three) different religious traditions, require also Methods in Religious Studies (RELS 3990) and Philosophy of Religion. Every graduate should have these courses on their resume.
3. Abolish the institutional language requirement and instead increase the number of humanities and life sciences general requirements, making room for students set on graduate work to train in specific, functional language options.

It is hoped that, with these changes or a simulacrum of them, USU can continue its tradition of excellence in methodological training while also producing more consistent and competitive Religious Studies graduates.

⁴ I would offer one addendum to this: students who determine as an undergraduate to go on to masters work ought to have the option to substitute a language as part of their general training. However, this should be pointed: Religious Studies students, for example, ought to train in Greek, Latin, or Hebrew.